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ABSTRACT

A project was conducted to determine the thoughts and feelings of probationers (mostly white males ranging in age from early 20s to early 50s) mandated by a judge to complete their GED (General Educational Development) diploma or their high school diploma at a local adult education program mostly attended by middle-aged white female displaced textile workers. The study began by interviewing the local criminal judge, two probation officers, and one probationer individually and holding a focus group in which six probationers participated. In addition, two teaching staff members were queried and the probationers were observed in the classroom and in tutoring sessions for 4 months. The study found that, unlike the adult students who attend the center on a voluntary basis, probationers differ in their motivation for completing a diploma. Although they see the value of achieving a diploma, outside support or coercion keeps them attending the program. Although most probationers initially had strong aversive reactions to the concept, most of them eventually began to work hard toward accomplishing their goals. The study concluded that since probationers had strongly negative attitudes toward being forced to do anything, they should be given more choice in determining whether to pursue a high school diploma or a GED. The study also concluded that more structured classroom learning and more supportive services should be provided to help the probationers succeed. (KC)

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Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Understanding the Learner Who is Court-Mandated to Learn

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Background

Several months before I began this research project, the local criminal court judge began to mandate as a probation requirement that adult offenders complete a high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) Diploma at our adult education center. I suspected that the learning experiences of probationers probably varied from our typical students — displaced textile workers — the majority of whom are white, middle-aged women receiving Federal Trade Act Funds for educational retraining. Although the demographics of the probationer population are continuously changing, the majority of probationers have been white males ranging in age from early twenties to early fifties. Our self-directed educational program had been designed for a diligent, disciplined student body. Now, as educators, we were called to provide a learning experience for a student body that, more than likely, might not want to be there. I wondered how we might teach a reluctant population of learners. I assumed that the probationers may not only be reluctant, but may have other strong emotions towards their mandated learning experience. I wondered what was going on for probationers who were court-mandated to achieve an educational goal. For me, the importance of this research was to hear the voices of learners who had the criminal court system preside over their educational goals.

Inquiry

What are the thoughts and feelings of those mandated by a judge to learn?

Action

I was aware that this new population might have problems and symptoms in their learning behavior that might differ from the other adult learners with whom we worked. I felt in order to get a more comprehensive idea of their learning experience, I would conduct interviews with the involved players: the presiding judge, several probation officers, teaching staff members, and most importantly, the probationers, themselves.

Data Collection

I began the research by interviewing the local criminal judge and then two probation officers. I interviewed one probationer individually and held a focus group in which six probationers participated. I queried two members of the teaching staff, as well. Throughout the four-month research process, I observed the probationers in classroom and tutoring sessions.

Findings

Not surprisingly, I found that unlike the adult students who attend our center on a voluntary basis, probationers differ in their motivation for completing a diploma. Even though they see the value in achieving the diploma, it is the outside support, and in some cases, coercion, that keep them attending the program. Strong reactions were given when describing their first thoughts and feelings about returning to an educational setting.

Adults on probation have a slow time buying into achieving their diploma. The majority expressed that the motivating factor for their continued participation came from being mandated by the court. They seem to lack internal motivation to pursue their diploma. When asked what motivates them to keep coming, the probationers gave the following replies:

"To get my High School diploma so the judge will be off my case."

"To get my GED for my probation officer."

"They think I'm doing it for me, but I'm really doing it for them. I need

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to be making money and I ain't making no money coming here."

"I have to say it's three reasons: My kids, my old lady, and my probation officer. Mainly my old lady is pushing me for this."

"Whoever makes the rules, whoever in the government says I have to come."

On some level I can understand their sentiments. Buying into an educational program can be a struggle for any one of us. Choosing between spending your time in an educational program or in prison seems to be a relatively easy choice. However, those in this situation have powerful reactions to being forced. Being forced into education does not necessarily make it a buy-in. When questioned about their initial thoughts and feelings about going back to school, the probationers expressed the following strong reactions.

"I dreaded it. I hated it. It made me sick to my stomach."

"I was frustrated and angry...Now I'm slowly getting over it and getting used to it."

"I tried to dodge coming. I tried to tell the probation officer I didn't need no GED. I had a job."

"I think it's my choice if I should get my education which is a good choice but I don't think someone else should tell me that I should have to get my education. It ain't right for somebody to tell you what you should do. I basically feel like it's violating my rights."

"It's just rough."

Fortunately, those same individuals with strong reactions were able to understand that the pursuit of a degree is a worthy goal in their own self-interest. I was glad to see they understood that getting their diploma would be an asset to them, no matter who was requiring them to do so.

"I thought it was going to be a drag, really. But I know the GED - I might need it one day. In the long run I figured it might do me some good. Plus I get to stay out of trouble."

"At first, I didn't like it either. I felt we were already on probation, we have crimes to pay. Why don't they just leave us alone. And then I said, well, I need my GED on account of my kids. If they come to me one day and ask me how to do something and I tell them I don't know, you know. How they suppose to feel? So that's why I'm trying my best to get mine."

"To get my GED is not for the probation officer or it's not for any judge, it is for myself because I think it will help myself."

Despite the strong reactions, our staff found most probationers willing to work hard towards accomplishing their goals. "It's been a great experience," one teacher said. "They are learning and earning respect and gaining an education. Most are pleasant. Few are not happy because they tell me this. They say if they did this earlier they wouldn't have to be doing this now. I consider this the number one attitude." Another teacher thought the situation was mixed. "Some are working extremely hard," she observed. "Others are acting like they don't care. Some are really quiet and get their work done. Others are friendly and glad you are doing it for them. Others don't want to be there." Staff members also realized that for this group of learners a more traditionally-structured classroom with group rather than individualized instruction would be beneficial.

The one issue of concern for staff and probationers alike is determining which of the two types of diplomas, high school or GED, should be set as a learning goal. This is an important decision because of the difference in weight the two diplomas carry, and because of the length of time to complete each. For some, the high school diploma is achievable but the GED is the path of least resistance. Who should make this determination? The judge believed that the staff at the adult education center should be responsible for the evaluation. However, in some cases, the court orders sent with the probationers mandated completion of the high school diploma as opposed to the GED. In other cases, the probation officers sent a request for a specific learning goal to be assigned. The probationers themselves had opinions about who should determine their educational goals:

"If you're going to get your diploma or something, the judge ought to leave it up to you to get the GED or the high school diploma instead of telling you which one you're going to have to get."

This question still remains a source of concern for our program. In assigning educational goals, we need to stay aware that for the probationer, court-mandated educational goals may appear to be punitive. I found that careful

matching between a probationer and his educational goal is an area that needs support in our program.

Implications and Future Directions

In my work with probationers, I am still learning about their needs as students. It is apparent that probationers do not like to be forced to accomplish an educational goal. Fortunately, most come to appreciate the value in achieving their diploma. The probationer's initial lack of ownership over his educational goal is a concern to me. It seems essential that probationers experience some measure of control over their education. This would be empowering and alleviate some of the strongly negative thoughts and feelings. Therefore, I recommend an intake interview process for the probationer upon entry into the program that would provide a thorough assessment of his learning abilities and disabilities as well as his opinions and attitudes towards learning. Interviews at scheduled intervals may also help in facilitating control. I would hope that providing probationers with time to share their experiences in learning would be a worthy exercise in teaching self-advocacy of their learning needs. In addition, interviews would be a method of matching probationers with personally satisfying educational goals.

One other recommendation I make is in agreement with staff observations. The current self-directed individualized learning format may not be advantageous for the reluctant learner. I recommend, therefore, more classroom instruction for the probationer program. Social support in the classroom may help offset some of the probationers' frustrations. As a staff, we need to remember that this learner population has far more to lose than the voluntary adult learner. When frustrations run too high, anyone could be expected to walk away from an educational program. However, probationers run the risk of losing their freedom and participation in their community, workplace, and family if they walk away. We, as staff of an adult education center, are responsible for providing a program with sufficient support to the probationer so that some frustrations can be alleviated. Towards this goal, I find myself as a practitioner encouraging our program to strive.❑

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